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SUBJECT: FIVE YEARS ON: THE STATUS OF EDUCATION REFORM IN
QATAR

¶1. (U) Summary: In 2001, the government of Qatar embarked on an ambitious mission to reform the country's education system. Under the banner of, "Education for a New Era," this initiative, led by the Amir's consort, Sheikha Mozah, aims to comprehensively reform education from kindergarten through college. The reform effort still faces considerable challenges, but has made tangible progress over the last five years. End Summary.

The beginning

¶2. (U) In Summer 2001, the RAND Corporation was approached by Qatar's Sheikha Mozah and asked to examine the country's current K-12 schools. Sheikha Mozah was motivated by several concerns, including a belief that the nation's school system was not producing high quality outcomes for Qatari students in terms of academic achievement, attending college, and success in the labor market; and that the system was rigid and outdated. Also, the growing trend of Qatari parents choosing to send their children to private schools at their own expense indicated that the system needed change. Earlier attempts to reform the public school system were successful on a small scale, but there was a sense that change was too slow and that a system-wide reform was needed.

¶3. (SBU) RAND arrived in October 2001 and spent the first school year in diagnosis, finding expected problems such as over-rigidity, weak curriculum, lack of accountability, and loaded bureaucracy. According to a RAND official, the team proposed three solutions to the Amir and Sheikha Mozah: (1) attempt to reform the Ministry of Education; (2) complete privatization of the education system and (3) establishment of a parallel independent school system to co-exist with the Ministry of Education system.

¶4. (U) The royal couple opted for the third alternative and the reform plan later adopted was based on two main elements (A) new government-funded schools that are not operated by the Ministry of Education but by other parties such as private companies, Qatari institutions or groups of teachers and/or parents, with varied pedagogical approaches and curricula; and (B) standardized national student tests that are aligned with new internationally-comparable curriculum standards and are used as one element of a rigorous school evaluation system. In 2002, an Amiri Decree established the Supreme Education Council, the new parallel institution designing, governing and coordinating the new educational policies.

The Supreme Education Council

¶5. (U) The Council, appointed by the Amir, consists of HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Heir Apparent, as

Chairperson. His mother, HH Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, Consort of His Highness the Amir, is Vice-Chairperson. Other members represent the education and business sectors of Qatar and most recently, two foreigners, a Swede and an Australian, were added. Members now include Her Excellency Sheikha Al-Mahmoud, the Minister of Education; Sheikha Abdullah Al-Misnad, President, Qatar University; Mohammed Saleh Al-Sada, Director of Technology at Qatar Petroleum; Sheikha Aisha bint Faleh Al-Thani, owner/operator of Doha College (private British school in Doha with an excellent reputation); Sheikh Faisal bin Fahad bin Jassim Al-Thani, Deputy Manager, Anadarko (also a previous Fulbright Scholar, 2004); Sigbrit Franke, head of the Swedish National Agency and the first woman to become Sweden's University Chancellor; and Paul Greenfield, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland (Australia).

16. (U) The role of the Supreme Education Council is to oversee education reform, help it grow, and objectively monitor its progress. The Supreme Education Council is responsible for education policy in Qatar (no longer the purview of the Ministry of Education). It is comprised of three institutes - the Education Institute, Evaluation Institute and the Higher Education Institute. The Education Institute directly oversees the Independent Schools and supports them with professional development for teachers and a wide range of other resources. The Evaluation Institute develops and conducts periodic assessment of student learning and evaluates school performance. The Higher Education Institute advises individuals on opportunities for higher education and careers and administers scholarship programs. More information is available on its website: www.english.education.gov.qa.

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17. (U) After much turnover, the permanent directors of the three institutes were named and each has now been in their respective positions for over a year. All three are U.S. alumni and good contacts of the Embassy.

--Sabah Al-Haidoos was appointed Acting Director of the Education Institute in September 2004. She previously served as Principal of Al-Bayan Educational Complex for Girls (a magnet school and the best girls' school in Doha). Mrs. Al-Haidoos has extensive teaching experience and served for 19 years as a physics and mathematics teacher before being promoted to Vice Principal. Mrs. Al-Haidoos earned a B.S. degree in Education and Science (1986) from the University of Qatar and a diploma in School Management from James Madison University in the U.S.

--Adel Al-Sayed was appointed by the Supreme Education Council to serve as the Director of the Evaluation Institute in early 2003. Prior to his current position, he was the Director of the Arab Educational Training Center for Gulf States. He also worked with the Qatar Ministry of Education in the areas of policy, evaluation and testing strategy, diversification of secondary schools, teacher awards, training program design, human resources development, and curriculum development for Gulf States. Mr. Al-Sayed is a member of the Qatar Academy Board of Governors, the Qatar Sports Academy, and the Board of Directors for the Arab Bureau of Education for Gulf States. He holds a M.Ed. in Measurement, Evaluation and Assessment from the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse and a Bachelor's degree from the University of Qatar.

--Dr. Jehan Al-Meer was appointed Acting Director of the SEC's Higher Education Institute in January 2005. Before joining the Institute, she served as an Assistant Professor and Head of the Biochemistry Section at the University of Qatar. Prior to this, she was President of the Technical Consultative Committee for the Supreme Council on Family Affairs. Dr. Al-Meer also spent several years in various

research and teaching positions in Qatar and the U.K. She began her career in 1984 as a chemistry teacher. Dr. Al-Meer holds a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and a M.S. in Biotechnology from the University of London, and a B.S. in chemistry/biology from the University of Qatar. She also recently completed a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Dr. Jehan is also a former Fulbright Scholar.

The Independent Schools

¶8. (U) At the heart of the education reform initiative are autonomous, government-funded schools called "Independent Schools." Currently, more than 30 independent schools offer new models for curriculum design, teaching methods and collaboration. Independent schools are intended to ensure students acquire the skills they need to build a secure future - skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, creativity, and the ability to use technology and communicate effectively.

¶9. (U) The first group of schools ("cohorts") opened in 2004 - the program's first year - with twelve independent schools. Cohort 2 comprised of 21 schools, opened in 2005. It has just been announced that an additional 21 will open in 2006, bringing the total to 54 independent schools. Most of these schools are former Ministry of Education schools that converted to independent schools. The idea is to open approximately 20 more schools a year from here on out and "let the experiment go where it will." The concept of parental choice has been introduced and will largely determine the success or failure of the new system. The independent schools are all still single-gender. The concept of co-ed schools has not been ruled out for future iterations of independent schools.

School Operators

¶10. (U) Operators of the independent schools are mostly education or business professionals. The operators of independent schools tend to be local businessmen who go into partnership with an experienced principal or vice-principal who may have been chafing under the old system. Operators must be Qatari citizens. (Note: This is a new rule. Previously, three independent schools were owned by non-Qatari Arabs but have since been bought out by Qatari's. End note.) The application process for becoming an operator of an independent school is rigorous and highly competitive.

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This year, the SEC received 167 preliminary applications; 78 were short-listed to compete in the final phase of the evaluation phase and 21 were selected by a panel comprised of five international and Qatari experts, in addition to an independent reviewer, and a final applications assessment committee. The proposals include a lengthy, thorough educational plan that must cover the vision of the school, school curricula, teaching methods, student assessment plans, student behavior and discipline, student support services, leadership, management, employment policies, professional development plans, financial accountability and external relations. The short-listed applicants attended a series of in-depth training programs to assist them in preparing and designing school plans. Many well-known Qatari's have applied to become or are independent school operators. Many Ministry of Education officials are operators, such as Dr. Said Al-Hajji, the Vice-Chairman of Qatar Foundation.

School governors

¶11. (U) In 2005, all new independent schools were required to elect their board of trustees. These volunteer boards

theoretically provide an extra layer of oversight, accountability and transparency within the schools and create a link to the community. Boards are composed primarily of parents but are also open to teachers, community members, or those with skills in law, finance or other pertinent areas.

School Support Organizations

¶12. (U) Autonomy is the guiding principle of this reform and operators have the freedom to make their schools a reflection of their own vision. To assist them, each operator can elect to have an onsite School Support Organization (SSO) advise and assist with school management, lesson plans, curriculum standards and professional development. SSO's are in the independent schools during their first year only. Currently contracted SSO's are Mosaica Education based in New York, Academy for Educational Development (AED) based in Washington DC, New Zealand's MultiServe, and Center for British Teachers (CfBT) based in Great Britain.

Curriculum

¶13. (U) The independent schools all operate under the same curriculum guidelines in four core subjects (math, science, English and Arabic). The existing Ministry of Education schools do not have to follow the same guidelines, but their students are to take the same standardized test the independent school students take. Independent schools are free to develop the content of their curriculum in any way they choose. New rigorous curriculum standards are based on international benchmarks. All independent schools emphasize learning English. The schools will teach math and science in English and English language studies begin at primary school. The strong emphasis on learning English is one of the reasons there is a large demand from Qatari parents to enroll their children in independent schools.

Qatarization

¶14. (U) Qatarization is a priority for the government in Qatar at all levels of society and education is no different. Potential operators must specify in their proposal a plan to Qatarize the school's staff. The SEC has set quotas for the percentage of mandatory Qatari teachers required in each school, depending on the type of school and its year in operation as an independent school. Primary schools and girls' secondary schools have higher quotas, since it is easier to find female Qatari teachers, while the boys' secondary schools have the lowest quotas. The SEC also expects that as the years progress, more qualified Qatari teachers will become available and therefore the quotas rise over time.

Professional development for teachers

¶15. (U) Some GOQ funds were set aside for teacher training to equip new teachers, in addition to standard MOE training, although there have been complaints that more could have been spent. The Qatar school teacher pool is a mix of nationalities. The women are overwhelmingly Qatari. One

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Embassy contact opined that there is "a vast over-supply" of Qatari women who have been trained as teachers. Unfortunately, the pedagogical variety needed to make a success of a larger system of independent schools is not yet in existence - it remains to be seen whether the school operators are far-sighted enough to invest in their teachers to provide this variety.

¶16. (U) The SEC has taken some steps in order to prepare teachers for this reform. A partnership between the SEC, Qatar University and Texas A&M University was formed. The SEC's Teacher Preparation and Certificate Program, a training consisting of two phases - intensive English language training and teacher preparation training, was offered last year, and again this year. The graduates of this program received a diploma from Qatar University and a certificate from Texas A&M University. There is also significant emphasis on ongoing professional development at each independent school.

Evaluation

¶17. (U) According to Qatari officials, all schools are to be held accountable through regular, objective assessments. These assessments, along with report cards on each school, will be shared with the entire nation (i.e., will be available online). The standardized tests are not to be used to determine eligibility for grade-to-grade promotion or for university entrance, but the results of the tests will be used to certify schools; to allow parents to make informed choices about schools; to allow schools to judge the quality of their teachers, and to monitor the overall progress of the system.

¶18. (U) In 2004, the Evaluation Institute administered its first nation-wide assessment of all public and private Arabic school students in Qatar, using the Qatar Comprehensive Educational Assessment (QCEA). Over 80,000 students took the standardized exams in four subjects - Arabic, English, math and science. The tests were given to students in grades 1-12, except science, which was given to students in grades 4-12. The results showed that most students' performance was either approaching the new standards or below. This was expected, given that there already was awareness that Qatari schools were struggling and the new standards were much higher. It also showed that there was a lot of work to be done to meet the new higher standards on which the tests are based. The results of the assessment also showed that the performance level of students at the current independent schools (after one year) was higher than the students at the traditional MoE schools and private Arabic schools. The results also showed that non-Qatari students performed better than Qatari students and that girls outperformed boys.

Issues

¶19. (SBU) There is consensus that education reform was needed in Qatar and overall, the public now appears to view the idea of independent schools positively. However, as with all things new, the initiative met with some initial backlash. Many of these concerns have dissipated with time (for example, Rand has moved out of its hands-on implementation phase and is now taking a more hands-off, advisory role) but some of the serious concerns remain legitimate issues today. Talk now revolves around concrete issues such as:

¶20. (SBU) Is the Supreme Education Council on its way to becoming another Ministry of Education? As the SEC starts to exert more control over the independent schools (in response to concerns about arbitrary styles of management and decisions made on an operator's whim), questions arise as to the true autonomy of the independent schools. One operator stated that he is unsure if the SEC even believes in "independent" schools, referring to the progression of tightening its reins on independent schools.

¶21. (SBU) Who are the operators, what are their motives and do they do a good job? In the first two years, it seemed that everyone wanted an independent school and everyone put in an application. Many of these operators had little background in education and wanted to get in on the project as a money-making venture. Many operators owned several

businesses or had other jobs and once they won the bid, they hired someone as the director/principal for the school and became relatively hands-off managers. Catching onto this trend, the SEC implemented a new rule this year that the

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operator of the school had to also serve as the principal. It also implemented a rule that no excess funds or surplus from the school's budget could be kept by the operator. These rules were put in place to emphasize that the schools are non-profit organizations and it was also an attempt to weed out the operators who were seeking monetary gain. However, without any profit to be made and with the considerable amount of work that goes into running an independent school, many Qatari's no longer see a benefit in becoming an operator. Some operators who entered the system under the previous rules have abandoned their schools, stating that with no profit and this new rule that they must be principals, they cannot and do not want to run the school. A handful of schools have been reverted to Ministry schools this year as a result.

122. (SBU) Should all schools be independent schools? There is debate about the balance between the number of Ministry and independent schools. Earlier in the reform process, it was announced that half the schools would be converted to independent schools and the rest would remain MoE schools. In March, the SEC formally announced that all MoE schools will be converted to independent schools in the next 4-5 years, and the Ministry would cease to exist. The Ministry, over the past two years, has laid off almost half its staff. The older teachers and administrators retired and the others were able to find jobs under the new system. The Ministry has already been stripped of its policy-making role, and it will continue to dwindle until the last school is converted. Parents who want their children to be enrolled in independent schools and not be left behind in the old system are driving the demand for more independent schools (all of them have waiting lists), but many think the initiative is still young and the results not concrete enough to make the call that all schools should become independent.

123. (SBU) Is this an attempt to "Americanize" Arabic education? There are concerns - occasionally voiced publicly in op-eds -- that this new system (introduced shortly after 9/11) seems to sideline the national ethos and cherished values and traditions of Qatar. Some say that the new syllabus dilutes the emphasis on Islamic studies and Arabic language. One newspaper article reported that some applicants have been refused licenses to become independent school operators because of the suspicious attitudes of the SEC committee towards operators whose vision and emphasis was on Islamic studies and Arabic. There have also been controversial episodes surrounding independent school syllabi - one school taught girls about the human reproductive organs and procreation; another used an English textbook that contained culturally insensitive pictures which some parents found obscene; another textbook included chapters on dating. These episodes did help fuel the notion that reform was a foreign concept, with materials from abroad passed onto local schools without proper scrutiny. (Note: In the past year, however, there have been fewer reports of incidences such as those above. End note.)

124. (SBU) Are the teachers ready to carry out this reform? As mentioned earlier, Qatar University with Texas A&M University launched a new certificate program for teachers. Initially, the goal was to enroll 100 Qatari teachers per year. The program was unable to recruit 100 students, even after the announcement that the SEC would provide hefty monthly stipends. The program, initially, was co-ed (only a handful of male participants) but when women started dropping out due to this reason, the male participants were asked to leave and the program became "female only" and it remains this way today. In the first year, the program graduated approximately 25 teachers. Many failed out due to

the tough requirements. Currently in its second year, the program has approximately 20 students. This program which was designed as a condensed, intensive program to quickly churn out qualified teachers to teach the new, tougher curriculum has not produced as many teachers and as quickly as the SEC had hoped.

The Higher Education Institute

¶25. (U) The Higher Education Institute in the SEC, which administers the state scholarship system and provides an advisory service for students on education options in Qatar and abroad, will in the future also be the licensing body for post-secondary education (trade, vocational schools, etc). Currently, the HEI is working to develop a strategy for higher education for Qatar, asking questions like - which subjects should be offered in Qatar, which subjects better taught abroad? Part of this initiative is reform of Qatar University.

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A note on Qatar University reform

¶26. (U) Qatar University (QU), the sole public, national university in Qatar, with some 8,000 students, is also part of the overall education reform effort, although it is less controversial and receives less attention. The QU reform effort is headed by the dynamic UK-educated Dr. Sheikha Abdulah Al-Misnad, a close relative of Sheikha Mozah.

¶27. (U) The key elements of QU reform are (more information is available on QU's new website - <http://www.qu.edu.qa/html/reformplan.html>):

-- Under the university reform program, QU became self-governing. Previously, it was under the authority of the Amir. A governing body of regents has now been established, with the power to name and replace the President.

-- QU has become autonomous. Previously, its budget was drawn up and administered by the Ministry of Finance and its staff members were civil servants. Now it has its own budget and personnel system, which it administers itself.

-- Previously, a student entered QU in a set discipline and remained in that discipline from day one until the end. Now a core curriculum (with a liberal arts overall theme) has been established, that all students are required to complete.

-- This has led to a significant change in structure, with the establishment of the College of Art and Sciences. This new college administers the core curriculum and awards degrees in its own right and is flanked by a series of professional colleges - of law, business, sharia, communication, etc.

-- QU has raised its standards for admission and those that do not meet the standards attend the Foundation Program - a one year bridge program between high school and college.

-- Stricter rules such as attendance, 10-year time limit to receive a degree, and shifting of key management personnel are also part of the reform.

-- QU plans to pursue accreditation for each college and degree program and eventually for the entire university.

Criticism of the GOQ's scholarship program

¶28. Critics continue to question the GOQ's revised scholarship program. Prior to the founding of the Higher

Education Institute (HEI), any Qatari who passed his/her high school exams and gained admission to a university was given a scholarship from the government. Many Qatari's were educated at American universities through these generous scholarships. The HEI has since revised this program and has established scholarships for selected schools only. There are approximately 300 elite schools on this list. Most are American (about 70%) or British, with small numbers from other European countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea and Taiwan). If a Qatari student does not gain admission to one of these schools, he or she will not receive government funding and will have to fund themselves. None of the schools on this list are from the Arab world, although next year, HEI plans to add some Arab universities like the American University of Cairo and American University of Beirut.

¶29. (U) This new program has been criticized as being unrealistic and out of touch with the current status of Qatari education and is expected to prevent many Qatari's from receiving an education abroad, since application standards for the elite schools on the list are beyond the reach of many Qatari students, if not of most.

USG support for K-12 education reform

¶30. (SBU) The Public Affairs Section closely monitors progress of the reform effort and when opportunities arise for partnership, post has taken active roles. In 2005, post coordinated a voluntary International Visitors (IV) program on chartered schools in the U.S, which 7 SEC officials attended. Post has also arranged numerous smaller-scale training for independent schools using Fulbright scholars in country, the Regional English Language Officer, English Language Fellows and other American experts in Doha. We

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have also sent several teachers and administrators from independent schools to educational conferences. The Student Advisor has also worked closely with the Higher Education Institute in setting up their student advising centers; she has trained them and even helped them recruit qualified guidance counselors. We have also made several large book donations to the SEC and independent schools. MEPI grants have also provided teacher-training and professional development for staff.

Comment

¶31. (U) There is existing tension between the open, forward-looking vision of Qatar's ruling couple and the generally conservative, inwardly-focused nature of Qatari society in many areas of Qatari life, and the field of education is no exception. Nevertheless, and despite the formidable challenges that still remain, it seems certain that education reform is here to stay. We will continue to monitor and report on the matter.

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